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REPORT  
ON THE  
MEANS OF COMPLETING AND  
DISTRIBUTING  
THE  
NATIONAL LIBRARY.

GREGOIRE, in the name of the Committee of Public Instruction.

CITIZENS,

A Bibliographic work on the books belonging to the Nation was long ago undertaken; but an account of it has never been rendered to the National Convention. Having lately been associated to the commissioners charged to superintend that operation, I come to lay before you in the name of the committee of Public Instruction, the measures we have taken to reorganize this work and to forward it as much as possible, that in the course of your session you may be able to estimate your bibliographic riches of which I am about to present to you a statement.

The scientific objects belonging to the nation are derived from the stores which she possessed before the revolution, from the heretofore castles of the tyrant, from the suppression of ecclesiastical, judiciary and academic corporations, from the emigrants, and the executed.

Those objects consist of books, manuscripts, charts, plans, statues, pictures, engravings, machines, medals, stones engraved in concave and in relievó, herbals, cabinets of natural philosophy, of natural history, &c. &c.

Rare and precious objects had been accumulated or rather monopolized to indulge the ambition of families heretofore noble. Such is the collection of the emigrant Castries consisting of more than twenty thousand articles, which must have cost several millions.

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The commission of the arts is employed in taking an inventory of these different articles. Relative to the manuscripts it has taken measures which will be concordant with those which will be presented to you by your commission of archives concerning the records. From these measures will arise a general excerption which will send all the useless papers to the paper manufactures, will lay before the public all that is useful, and will put into the exclusive hands of government what ought to be known to government alone.

The ministerial repositories were choaked up with abundance. That of war alone contains more than twelve thousand geographical maps; that of foreign affairs of Versailles contains about fourteen thousand manuscript volumes in folio. I proceed to the libraries which are the object of my report. Those repositories are far from having been properly superintended. It is asserted that from the single library of Mejanès, at Aix, ten thousand volumes are missing, and it is well known that knaves do not fail to choose the best. In other parts a large quantity of books have been sold at a low price or by weight, perhaps ever since the decree of the 10th October, 1792, which ordered a stop to be put to all sales of that nature.

At a period when the revolution makes morality one of the chief objects of its concern, and prosecutes all dilapidators, civic denunciations and the constant zeal of the popular societies will doubtless enable you to detect the guilty of every kind, and to prove that responsibility is not a chimera. There are some parts of human knowledge with which we are little acquainted, whether it be that in general their progress was not equal to that of other sciences; such are statics which is one of the fundamental branches of the art of government, meteorology, anatomy compared, acoustics, the chemic arts, the analysis of sensations, general grammar: or that they have been less cultivated with us than with other people; such are the study of foreign languages and the working of mines; in the last of which articles the Saxons and the Swedes are our instructors. But in almost all other kinds, in spite of all the havock made by the giddy freaks of ignorance or the crimes of malevolence, we still possess immense riches.

In the single department of Paris the nation has about eight hundred thousand volumes, including the national library, which in 1373, was composed in all only of 910 ma-



manuscript volumes, and which at present contains, besides its vast collection of manuscripts, more than three hundred thousand printed volumes; which, joined to the mass of the other books of the different communes of the Republic, presents a list of ten millions of volumes.

If from these ten millions we deduct all the reduplicative copies, there will remain perhaps two hundred thousand different works of which nearly one quarter are anonymous, the authors of some being known, of others unknown. It is presumed that the national library is in possession of only four fifths of the different kinds of books, for it wants a number of books which are found in the other libraries, especially of the frontier communes, exclusively of a pretty large quantity of foreign works which are not to be found in France, but which it may be possible, nay easy to procure (at least the greater part of them) through the medium of the political agents and consuls of the Republic.

If other libraries, such as that of the Vatican, enriched with the manuscripts taken from Heidelberg, boast of having some which are the only ones of their kind, that of Paris may with more propriety pride itself in possessing things which would be sought for in vain elsewhere. That of Vienna might rival it, but that the new literary treasures with which the library of Paris is daily enriched will shortly secure to it the incontestible privilege of being the first in the known world. The preliminary operation to the work of the French bibliography was the transmittal of the catalogues of all the libraries. Owing to some men of letters, some administrations complied with the textuary dispositions of the decree; but the greater part of them executed nothing or executed ill. They executed nothing, through the neglect of the administrators, who assuredly did not neglect to receive their appointments, and many of the books, a prey to insects and dust, suffered sensible impairment.

Add to this cause, that different departments, in whose circuit were vast libraries, were apprehensive that they would be taken from them. Here you recognize that spirit of selfishness, or rather of federalism, which makes itself a centre, which insulates itself, and which is a crime. Whatever is national belongs to no individual, it belongs to all. The public interest seems to oppose the displacing or dividing of certain collections which, besides the value of the works of which they are composed, derive additional merit from the

manner in which those collections are assorted. Such is that of Schoepflin at Strasbourg.

However, the libraries of Strasbourg, of Lille, of Perpignan, for instance, no more belong to those communes than their fortifications. The citizens of Brest, of Dunkirk, of Besançon have as much right to them as they, and the whole is the joint property of the great family, which through the medium of its representatives, will be able to make a repartition dictated by the love of the country and avowed by it.

Other administrators executed ill, although three successive instructions pointed out the process of the work. In order to succeed in it, it was necessary: 1st, To employ men of probity; this is the first quality requisite in all cases, in this especially, since a dishonest man may easily baffle the strictest inspection by tearing precious engravings out of a book, and by substituting common things in the room of rare medals. 2d. To employ men versed in paleography and bibliography; the latter is the science of the bookseller its object is the titles of books and their value in trade; the former is acquainted with the history of the art, the variations of the writing, idioms and customs. Unfortunately they were for the most part inept copyists who have altered the titles of the books, changed the dates, confounded the editions, and sent useless catalogues in sheets, instead of catalogues in cards, the only ones that could be of any utility to us.

Carelessness or ignorance have been carried to such a pitch that many catalogues, at the end of a confused list, added these words: "Moreover, three or four hundred volumes in English, German, Greek, and Hebrew, or in writing not to be deciphered, and bound in parchment, which we have not thought fit to enumerate." Thus do the penmen of these catalogues express themselves, in speaking of books perhaps the most precious of the repository. They judged books by their covers, as fools judge of men, by their coats. The books of peerage, treatises of genealogy, the works in which despotism consigned its follies and insanity were almost always decorated with morocco, whilst the books of Hubert, Linguet, of William Allen, of Milton escaped the compass of censure and the pursuit of the inquisition of courts only by taking refuge in some unknown corners under the modest covering of parchment. The works which exposed the crimes of tyrants and vindicated the rights of the



people were the Sans-Culottes of the libraries. The various causes just mentioned having suspended the transmittal of the cards, we have received only about twelve hundred thousand, which answer nearly to three millions of volumes; for every single card indicates a work, of what number of volumes soever it may consist. We have not yet therefore one-third of the catalogues. The decree of the 8th Pluviose enjoins the administrators to finish this work in the space of four months. As it behoveth ever to accompany precept with instruction, the commission of the arts hath forwarded to all the administrators an ample information concerning the manner of drawing up an inventory of all objects of arts and sciences, and we hope that the energy of the revolutionary government will accelerate the drawing up and transmittal of the catalogues. I proceed to the work done until this day on the cards, whose original object was to form for the press a general and methodical bibliography of France. Without entering into details which would be as irksome as useless, I will observe that an undertaking of that nature would be of very difficult, expensive, and tedious execution. Stravins, a man particularly well versed in this matter, asserts that it would be more easy to carry Mount Atlas than to write an universal literary history. Of this you may judge from the catalogue of the National Library, which notwithstanding the pains taken to secure it from the attacks of criticism has afforded matter for very just censure. The library of father Lelong, edition of Fontenelle, which solely points out works relating to the history of France, is in eight volumes in folio, comprising 48,223 articles, besides a supplement of about 6,000, and still several thousand are wanting. This fact is sufficient to shew that a general bibliography would be enormously expensive, for it would form a mass of more than 150 volumes in folio. The inconveniencies which would attend this undertaking, at least for the present moment, greatly counterbalance the advantages that might be expected from it: if, however, it be thought useful, it may at any time be executed, for the materials will remain to us. We have perceived that the plan formerly followed was vicious; that should the work be still protracted during some years, it might meet with still greater obstructions; and as the convention hath passed a very wise decree on the establishing of libraries, they must be organized; they shall be so.

The section of the library which was at the Louvre, being under our immediate inspection, since the committee's place of meeting has been changed, shall be diligently and constantly superintended. Regulations and instructions have been drawn up to direct the work. All the titles of the books are mutually rectified by confrontation; all the cards of partial catalogues are intercollated to form a general catalogue; all the manuscripts are apart, the order of the anonymous works is regulated by the order of the subjects. The known authors are in alphabetical order, the editions are in order of dates, the copies of the same edition are put together, and if the administrations are exact in forwarding to us the catalogues, if from this time hints are collected for forming a good plan of distribution, we have room to hope that in eight or nine months the work will be completed.

Besides the economy of time and expense, there will result from this plan the advantage of speedily presenting the public with precious deposits. In the houses of the monks we shall find the works of the ancients, of the moderns in those of the emigrants, and those libraries of parade which were reserved for some individuals, becoming henceforth the property of the community, will be accessible to indigent genius.

When a German forms the project of uniting all the editions of the Bible to the number of eight thousand, although he is still deficient of two thousand; when an Englishman amuses himself in collecting three hundred and sixty-five elegant editions of Horace that he may have one for every day in the year, we see nothing in this but the calculation of a whimsical curiosity. But the work of the bibliography promises us the result of real utility to the art of Printing, that transcendent art which had no infancy and will never grow old, which hath made our revolution and will support it.

By that we shall secure from the avidity of foreigners the very costly copies of authors whose works have been engraved; the copies of about twelve hundred works some of which have been drawn off in vellum; the copies of about twelve thousand works printed in the fifteenth century, the price of which augments in an exorbitant progression, in fine the copies of an infinite number of other works printed more lately which are at present very much sought after.

When we know that we have twenty thousand copies of such a book, whilst we have only twenty of such another;



besides their intrinsic value we shall know the value attached to them by reason of their scarcity. By the means of duplicates and exchanges you will be enabled to complete the principal library of Paris. It wanted amongst other things the Titus Livius, printed at Venice in 1470, by Vandilir of Spire. A copy of that work which arrives to it from Villeaiffanchie will be a monument in a double point of view, as it is scarce, and as in the siege of that rebellious city a bullet tore the cover and the margin of one of the volumes without materially impairing the text. By the knowledge of a number of odd volumes, several sets may be completed. The bibliographic work will furnish abundant materials for writing anew the history of France, for that work is to be done over again. Then will be brought to light a number of anecdotes which prove the crimes of despotism. Permit me here to make some observations on the plots of our enemies to impoverish and vilify a people who, in spite of their efforts, will be ever rich, ever great. In one part idiots were seen calumniating genius, to console their own want of it, and gravely asserting, without any distinction of useful or noxious talents, that a learned man is a scourge in a state; which affords us at least the consoling assurance that we have nothing to apprehend from them on that score.

At Paris, Marseille and other parts it was proposed that the libraries should be burnt; theology, said they, because it is fanaticism; jurisprudence, as chicane; history, as lies; philosophy, as dreams; the sciences, as useless. These were the sentiments of the vizier of one of our tyrants who wished to confine the productions of the press to the Almanac and legendary tales. At the same time, counter-revolutionists, under the mask of patriotism destroyed monuments in the repository of the *Petits Augustins*. Some men, foreigners perhaps, were surprised that such a marble pillar, worth 20,000 livres should be preserved. At the principal library they were scandalised that the two silver shields in the cabinet of Medals were not yet sent to the mint, nor the circles of the horizon and meridian of the two magnificent globes which are in the same repository, to the cannon foundry.

The policy of our enemies has ever been to take from us all they could, to destroy what they could not take away, in a word to commit and suborn crimes that they might have the pleasure of imputing them to us, representing us as barbarians who refuse an asylum to the arts.

How consolatory for us and opprobrious for them is the picture of their intrigues, their corruption and atrocity contrasted with French honor and generosity!

Notwithstanding the decrees which prohibit the selling or destroying of the national books, some administrators, it is said, would feign arrogate to themselves the power of life and death over authors. Their functions are to preserve, arrange, accelerate the completing and sending of the cards. We must know what we have before we consider what we ought to preserve.

Few writers indeed present themselves to posterity with dignity. Though over the library of Alexandria were these words: "Treasure of Medicines for the Soul," that library as well as ours doubtless contained reveries which are a scandal to reason. Those vast reservoirs of the thoughts and projects of all ages and countries, are at once the shame and the glory of the human race. But it should seem that man is destined to grope his way in the perplexed mazes of opinion, to wander through all errors before he arrives at truth. False ideas, absurd systems have at least the advantage of serving as buoys to morality; they mark the rocks. It is not always true, what Fontenelle asserted, that the follies of fathers are lost to their children. Thus a good history of the feudal system, which was one of the great errors of the human mind, would be a very philosophic work. The knowledge of the errors of reason guards it against similar errors. The recital of the crimes of tyrants consigns them in a more signal manner to the malediction and execration of after ages. When we shall have formed the general catalogue, we shall call in taste and philosophy to explore this second mine, and to look for the gold sand even in the mire of absurd books; this will be the object of a particular report which the committee is about to consider on.

After having furnished the national libraries, there will remain to you several good works, copies of which were very numerous; these may be sold. As to those which may have been placed in the index of reason, they may become objects of exchange with foreign nations, and procure us such of their works as are wanting to us, and are not unworthy of a place in the library of a free people. The spirit of discernment will preside over the excerpition, justice will make the distribution, and on the hypothesis that this purificative





